

Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 21A – September 27, 2020
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32, Psalm 25:1-9, Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

Well, we've suddenly moved a great step forward in the journey to Jerusalem on which we've been following Jesus since Pentecost. In fact, as we meet him in Jerusalem in today's Gospel text, he's in the temple complex teaching people. He triumphantly entered the city several days before, on the day we refer to as Palm Sunday. He came as a returning, victorious king (Matt 21:1-11). Since then he had gone to the temple once before this scene and he threw out the money changers at that time (Matt 21:12-17). And now, as he was teaching, the chief priests and elders confront him.

Now, he's no longer sparring with the Pharisees in Galilee and Judea. The chief priests were the highest religious authorities. They had acquired their authority from being descended from the first priests God had called to serve the Israelites millennia before. They also derived authority from the Roman government that had agreed to allow them to serve in Jerusalem. So the priests and elders ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" In their society, a man received his authority to carry out his work by his birth. And Jesus wasn't born a rabbi (as far as they and the public could tell). He clearly had had the support of the people on Sunday, but in the opinion of the temple leaders, Jesus wasn't the king that the public had welcomed into Jerusalem. And his birth didn't give him the authority to teach, preach and heal; to determine how things would be done in the temple. The priests and elders considered that **their** role. And they needed to do what they could to keep the peace in Jerusalem so that the Romans wouldn't bring even more oppressive force to bear on the people of Judea. So they questioned him.

Of course, Jesus could have answered, "God, my Father, gave me authority," but he knew that the temple leaders wouldn't accept this answer. They'd find it

blasphemous – taking God’s name in vain – so he engaged in the verbal jousting that we heard in today’s reading.

We accept Jesus’ possible answer to the chief priests and elders as the truth. We recognize his authority. He knew that they wouldn’t accept this answer. They’d find it blasphemous – taking God’s name in vain – so Jesus engaged in the verbal jousting that we heard in today’s Gospel reading.

He challenged them with the question about John’s authority and caught them in their lie of omission: “We don’t know.” Authority is at the heart of this Gospel text.

Authority is at the heart of the demonstrations opposing police violence against people of color that have been held throughout the spring, summer and into this fall. Authority is at the heart of the decisions of grand juries around the country after the killings by police of Black men and women in various scenarios.

Authority is at the heart of President Trump’s nomination of a Supreme Court justice to fill the position just vacated by the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Authority is at the heart of the Senate leadership’s intent to move forward to approve that nomination quickly, only five weeks before the presidential election when four years ago the same leaders refused to act on President Obama’s nominee to the Court, claiming that it was too close to the presidential election that was then eight months away.

Jesus responded to the chief priests’ and elders’ hypocrisy in claiming not to know the source of John’s authority to preach repentance, with the parable of the two sons. It’s quite straightforward. Dad asked his sons to work in the vineyard. One refused, but then, did go and work. The other agreed to work, but then failed to do so.

Most of us would probably agree with the saying “actions speak louder than words,” so we’d agree with the chief priests and elders that the first son, although rude, is the one who “did the will of his father.”

We don’t know what motivated either son to speak and act as he did. We often don’t know what motivates many of the people we meet, those who live in our communities and those in our extended families. We don’t know what motivates

people to come or not to come to church services. We don't know what motivates one person to spend money in one way and another in another way. We don't know what collection of experiences shapes the religious and political beliefs of people. We don't know why a couple who are friends may be struggling in their marriage; why one person always seems to have nothing but complaints, and someone else is so unfailingly gracious.

We don't know these things. We may guess – just as we may guess about our questions related to the parable and its characters – we may make assumptions and judgments, but ultimately, we don't know. And that gives rise to a bit of caution, if not humility, in our judgments.

I suspect that we are headed for more disagreement and apparent authority in our country in the weeks and months to come. Of course, I can't know the outcome, but I pray God's leading and guiding of all of the players so that we will do God's will. I also pray that most of the people of this country will take part in the election, even if they are not excited about the candidates, so that we can have a clear expression of the will of the people, which I hope is obedient to God's will for us.

We hear from Ezekiel that God was doing a new thing, contrary to the promise God's people had received through Moses in the wilderness in God's rules for life (Exodus 34:7) – the ten commandments. The old law told the people that the effects of the sins of parents would be experienced by their descendants, to the third and fourth generation. Now, Ezekiel proclaimed the word of the Lord: people would be held responsible for only their own sins – not those of their ancestors (18:4). And more than that, “when the wicked shall turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life.” (18:27.) This sounds very much like the repentance Jesus (and John) preached. There is hope for us, for our society, like there was hope for the first son in the parable who initially refused to work in the vineyard, but in the end, was obedient to his father. The other son became a hypocrite when he failed to work after having said that he would.

So, no matter what may have happened in the past, God is eager to meet us in the present and to offer us an open future. It's not too late. God is here, inviting each

of us into the kingdom and to lives on earth that open before us, to be lived in love and obedience.

So, we might look inside ourselves for those things that are holding us back from receiving God's promises. What things do we hold on to that make it difficult to believe and to accept God's forgiveness? What makes it hard to imagine that the future can be different from the past?

How do we prepare ourselves for this future God offers? Well, we have the role model for that part of our existence, as well. As Paul explained to the Philippians, we are to have the mind of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5). "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others," (Phil 2:3-4.) Of course, again, this is easier said than done. But we have the model for this life, and we can strive to follow him. And when we realize that we've gone astray, we can pull back, turn around, make amends, and live a new life in Christ. This is true, no matter what happens in the Supreme Court and no matter what happens in the presidential election. Because first and foremost, we are God's.

Let's pray. You love us completely, Lord. You love us into imitating you, to having your mind so that we can live in your realm – heaven on earth. It often feels like anything but that to us, Lord. But your presence on earth opened the way to change all that. Keep our minds engaged with yours. Keep our hearts open to the power of your love in life. In your name we pray.

C: AMEN